

The Minstrel

Redeemer College's Poetry and Fiction Magazine

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THE MINSTREL
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Volume 10, Spring 2000

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as I had in the writing
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Maggie Vandermeer
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The Minstrel is an annual
compilation of Redeemer
students' best creative writing.
We hope that in future years
there will be a continued support
of the magazine both by
increased submissions and
constructive criticism. Thank
you to those who contributed to
this year's issue. Keep writing!

Imago: For those interested in
creative writing, consider
joining the student creative
writing club, Imago. For more
information, contact Jamie
Hofing, Angela Reitsma, or
Faith Hicks.

Cover Art: "Inscape" by Faith
Hicks.

November Wind

His birth is in the wind tonight
I can feel or see but almost feel
His cradling hay
I wonder at this fatalism
That he was born
In a wooden box
And I think that I am being passed over
By the rippling echoes
Of what happened that night
Still vibrant in this broad pond of time
The wind chimes
The metal hooks on the barren flagpole
Into an atonal host of heaven
Somehow
It says something of an
Incarnation
I had forgotten
Beneath the skin
I painted
On the wooden angel
His wings were hollow
For \$1.30 at the craft store
They don't fill them with the glory
That costs a son
Listening to this wind tonight
I can feel his wings
Buoyed over a middle eastern landscape
So different from what we've made it
And I wonder if I painted
The curving line of his mouth
The wrong direction

Brett Dewing

joy comes in the mourning

sitting on your back porch, my alien toes
curled against the sun-soaked boards,
i'm drinking coke
that explodes in my nostrils

dizzy from the cricket's song,
i twirl a lock of dirty winter hair
between my fingers
(on my nails the pink polish is cracking)

...then dream about joyriding
down that gravel lane
the music a painful thunder
in my willing ears

we went swimming: you and me
and a green lake swollen with fish
that nibbled on our toes—
the water so cold it hurt to breathe

and afterwards the warmth
of the fire you made, pine smoke
and bright birch flame and your
sooty fingers against my face...

but now i sit here, splinters
eating away at my flesh
as you speak on the phone
with the girl you met last week

yet when i put down my coke
and run through the silver-wet grass
—whose moisture the sun has not yet consumed—
the air i breathe is fresh, and sweet, and clean.

Rietje Van Arragon

Shades of Tan

Karen Horlings

The three girls sat at a low table, colouring. It was a typical way to spend an afternoon in their grade one class, and the assignment was a familiar one. Katie was proud of how she made sense of the lines, how she knew which crayon to use to fill each space: tree trunks were brown, leaves were green, the sky was blue, flowers, clothing and hair were freedom. Any crayon could be used, any choice be made.

Katie looked down at the picture before her; a little boy. She coloured the clothes, choosing the crayons carefully. Blue pants, like the ones her brothers always wore, and a red shirt, just because she liked red. She looked at the eyes of the boy and thought for a moment. She wanted to make them like her mommy's eyes, but there was no crayon that matched them. They were brown and green at the same time, and the crayons came in brown, and they came in green, but they were separate colours. She decided to give the boy her daddy's eyes instead, and filled them in with a blue crayon. Then she picked up the brown one and gave the boy her mommy's hair.

Katie looked at the paper of the girl beside her. The girl's name was Anna. She was Katie's friend, and also her cousin. Anna was colouring her picture too, but Katie noticed something different. The face of the boy was brown. Katie thought for a moment. Tree trunks were coloured brown, some birds were coloured brown, doors and rocking horses and things made of wood were coloured brown, but she had never seen skin coloured brown before. Some people made skin yellow. Other people made skin orange and put red circles in the cheeks. Katie did that sometimes too, but she didn't really like it. People were not really yellow, or orange with red cheeks, or brown.

"Wait a minute, Anna!" said Katie. "People aren't coloured brown."

"Yes they are," said Anna. "Some people are brown."

Katie was surprised. People were not the colour of trees and birds. People were the colour of people, even if there wasn't a crayon for them. Anna looked angry, and Katie was puzzled.

"No they're not, they're all the same colour, some people just have more tans." Katie looked around for the teacher. She wanted the teacher to tell Anna that all people were really the same, and that some just had more tans. But the other girl at the table, Leah, said to Katie, "Yes they are. Some people are brown, and some are yellow, and some are . . . like us."

Katie thought as hard as she could. There was a man living down the street that had lots of tans, was he different? There was a show that her family watched on TV where two boys with lots of tans lived with people without lots of tans, were they different? A little while before, her minister and his wife had adopted a baby boy, and they said he could either be a black baby or a white baby. That had confused Katie. She thought that the baby might be look like a zebra, but when she had gone to see him, he looked like any other baby. They had named him Jonathan, and he had lots of curly hair. Katie liked that baby, but she didn't see him very often.

Anna and Leah were still looking at Katie, who did not know what to say. She did not want to colour the little boy brown, and she did not want to colour him yellow, or orange with red cheeks, or blue or green, or anything else. None of the crayons were right for skin. Katie did not colour the face of the boy at all. She left it blank.

For a long time, Katie did not colour people's faces, or their arms, or legs, or hands. There was no right crayon. She thought that maybe faces were freedom, like clothes, but that did not seem right. People could not change their faces like they could change their clothes. Sometimes she would ask someone what colour was right— yellow or brown or orange with red cheeks— but she never got an answer. So when Katie coloured people she left their faces empty, but she did not like that either. The whiteness of the paper always looked dull next to the shine left by the crayons.

American Gothic

I see him trekking to the fields
With his pitchfork in one hand
And his strength in the other.
I see him poke and prod
The innocent hay bales.
Oh, the violation.

I see him return from the day's kill,
gazing with piercing eyes
into the inner being of the house.
I can hear his intentions,
Smash through the hardwood stairs.
As he approaches

I see her following him
Not as an individual or slave
But as an appendage of him.
I see her washing his vestments
concealing the stains
that can never be removed

I see her preparing the meals.
Tenderizing the meat and dressing
The table for her groom.
I see her hovering over his shoulder
Like a vulture, waiting for the leftovers
Of the decaying corpse.

There are never any clouds in the sky
And the sun oppresses all emotion.
Oh mother, how I want to leave
But not even you can hear me scream.

Jamie Hofing

(already)

he says i will
never hurt you
and then holds her close
(crushing her ribs)
and she fears
the promise is broken
(already)

Judith Byl

My Love

My love for you? A dying rose
Petals parched and withered;
Yours, you claim, a mighty oak
Roots fed by the river.

Blue satin gown I never wore—
Crumpled in my closet;
Discarded now, my passion's scorned
Lying where you tossed it.

The dying ember once so bright
Can scarcely spark one flame;
Suffocated through long neglect,
Burned bright before you came.

Do flowers take the shape of love?
Yours would be a thistle;
A kitten's worth you count my life
Each pretense drowns my soul.

My heart's on board that west-bound train,
I'll follow where it goes;
Never once looking back; my love's
A dead withered rose.

Kristy Whalen

leaving (you)

i walk away into the night you
seem so sure that i'll return
"i love you" (just not here) a kiss you
handed to me with my coat
 maybe i am only now lost
 (wide awake while you are sleeping)
 maybe you are feeling wary
 (choking slowly while i'm sleeping)
night embraces me it softens
night embraces me it glistens
 now you speak and i still listen
 slowly though
 i curl
 away
what if soon i learn to leave
to wish i
was
without
(you)

Angela Reitsma

Love

love
is cosmic bowling.
a shot in the dark
the confusion of a disco ball
the mixed signals of canned music.
and every time
i think i've made a strike
my ball lands in the gutter
and i end up
with a score of zero.

Beth Luchies

The Eyes of One

From a dark cloth with tiny holes
Come visit a world where the sun shines
The ice melts, the ground moves.
Where I take my walk each day.
On the street are swollen bellies
Of life within a child.
The doctor says: wrong's all right,
Injects the needle with a smile.
The beggars ask for more money,
So they can get away.
The bruises of an animal on the paper doll
Denied, denied.

A flood of dissipation, strange
That I do not plunge in with them.
The truth inside — struggles to breathe
As I stumble down this road
To prove my worth, to make a name.
To protest is not a benefit —
A rough hand on my shoulder.
Reconciliation with my world around
Not a consolation — I need to stand on solid ground.
I need some solid ground.

Slain, askew, and ripped,
Be careful not to trip on death, and
Lies and visions of ill monstrosity.
Go back,
This place is not for you.
Soon I'll sit by the sea
And Hope's castaway will find me.
Its castaway will find me.

Jennifer Veenstra

Epilogue (To An Unexpected Summer)

you scare me
 remind me of a girl I once knew
 "Flirting With the Precipice"
 you hang from
 enjoying the view (?)
let me drive you
that long way home
 I know a better way
it frightens me this
life without a helmet
 use mine
 He's big
 and solid
 and full of forgiving love
 like a mother
 in a four room house
 waiting for you on the road
teach me this
 a lesson I cannot yet name
as I watch each threshold
 trepidatiously cross
 into uncomfortable orange rooms
 that I love
let me end this length with you
 you have a longing you can't describe
 you're isolated
 and deep
 and given to misinterpreted inspiration
 like the pond

Brett Dewing

waiting

I'm so impatient.
Impatience
burnt the brownies
by baking them
too hot, too soon
before (even) adding the eggs.

Judith Byl

Finding God

The angels hover around me
watching protectively;
The saints look down,
eyeing me as I pass;
The spirits of a thousand dead archbishops
warn me not to touch;
Even the Holy Mother
keeps her infant Son safely away from me.
The altar says "Keep off"
The organ says "Be quiet"
The dust on the Christ says "Do not disturb"
The place has the air of enormous sanctity
and people come here to find God.
But me, I slip quietly through the ornate door
and look for my God in the parking lot,
my face to the sky.

Leslie McEvers

Priceless

Speeding down treed lanes,
Our car scans the bar codes
Cast by the afternoon sun

Cool	Dark	0
Warm	Light	1
Warm	Light	1
Cool	Dark	0
Cool	Dark	0
Cool	Dark	0
Cool	Dark	0
Warm	Light	1
Cool	Dark	0
Warm	Light	1

Encoding the beauty of the spheres.

Rosanna Hessels

The Long Ride Home

Angela Reitsma

I was there for two months. Or a lifetime. I'm not sure which. The plane ride was my transition between worlds, as the train ride home now is. I'm glad of the time to be alone, to sort through the memories like dirty laundry. I have a seat to myself, which is nice, unlike the plane ride up here. I can remember it quite clearly. Trying to forget my mother's tearful goodbye, I sat on the plane, looking tough. My lunch was wrapped in a red handkerchief; I twisted it into knots beneath my fingers. I paid the taxi driver, carried more than I could handle and walked downtown, looking cool. Everyone had had their suggestions of what to bring and as a result the luggage situation was ridiculous. I met the others, promptly forgot all their names and climbed on the van, looking calm. My shaking hands threw my stuff to the back, and I smiled at no one in particular as I sat down. I read *Brave New World* all the way to the camp. I set up my tent in the dark, was too tired to look for my flashlight and lay down in bed, wondering when the real treeplanters would arrive.

That was the first day. The second wasn't really so different from the eight hundred million that followed it, but I remember being relieved. Relieved because somebody was telling us how to plant trees, because I finally knew what it was like and because nothing was ever as terrible as you imagined. Just waking up on the second morning, actually eating breakfast at six a.m. without too much difficulty, and seeing the sunrise improved the day. One of the older ones said it was easy for greeners to be optimistic, at first. His black dreadlocks swung against his cereal bowl, and he flicked his cigarette in my direction. Was he trying to scare me? No one could do that more than I already was, those first days. No one was more effective than I at terrifying myself.

I don't like remembering. And yet I do, because I'm not there anymore, you see. The sun isn't quite as hot, or the hunger as sharp when I'm here, thinking about then. Time dissipates the emotion, I suppose. You'd think it worked the other way around, that the minutes and hours would increase my stories, that time would only help me exaggerate. But the events have merely crystalized, and pour out of my mind, proofread. So that I have no choice but to remember, and no chance to forget.

* * *

A is for Abitibi. B is for Bears. C is for Cattleplant. The racket of blackflies increases. D is for Duff. E is for Every Six Feet. A raspberry bush attacks me, but I escape. I dodge the nettles too. F is for Furrow. Only six more hours, three more weeks, eight more days off. Only one more bag up before I collapse, one more lunch break before I quit. G is for Ground. H is for Hard hats. I is for Ice. The hail cuts up my hand upon contact, but that only blends in nicely with the blister on my two smallest fingers and the growing callous on my thumb. J is for Journal. K is for Kahlua. L is for Land. I take another step, not because I want to or even because I have to, but because my body has forgotten how to do anything else. And m? M is for Mosquito.

I scratch under my woolen coat, and tear off a layer of clothing. In the early morning the frost drives us to wear as much as possible, but the extra clothes quickly become irritating as the day heats up. Two steps, a glance back, and I slam my shovel into the dirt. Forward, backward, my left hand grabs a tree and shoves it in the hole seconds before my right foot stomps it shut.

We're not gentle with the trees, these black spruce and white spruce and sometimes red pine, but we don't have to be. They will, though it seems unlikely now, survive. They're hardy, they fight for a living in the north and they win. I've seen them clinging tenaciously to rock faces, growing on nothing or springing up from unlikely places like swamps and burns. I stuff another one into the ground, illegally bending the roots into a J shape. I wipe sweat off my forehead; how quickly this has become my life, and erased all evidence that I am anyone other than a treeplanter. I feel disjointed, like my thoughts, and tired.

* * *

I was always tired, it seemed. Even now, on the train, my head tries to fall forward and replace the memories with dreams. They are not so easily ignored. Like lingering bruises, the events refuse to fade. I wonder if the changes, even when invisible, will be permanent. In camp, my days established themselves into a gradual pattern of work, eat, sleep. That first week, especially, I collapsed into bed by eight or nine p.m. at the latest. I felt like a hermit, but my tent was the only escape from the glaring trees. We planted them all day, hundreds and thousands, and then drove home through living tunnels of trees, ate in the cookshack constructed from dead and accusing trees, and slept at night with the fingers of trees embracing our tents. They even invaded my dreams, jumping insolently out of their holes after I had planted them, and chasing me. And I would wake up, sweaty suddenly though the weather was approaching zero and my breath caught on the sides of the tent, and see the looming shadows of more trees through the nylon. Sleep would eventually overcome even my paralyzing fear of bears.

* * *

N is for Numbers. I always lose track of mine. You'd think that with little else to do during the day mentally, it would be hard to lose count, but I do. It is possible to lie, of course, but that's O for Overcount. P is for Perfect Plot. Elusive, like the soil I am searching for. Q is for Quiomet Canyon; I think that we're going there tomorrow. I'm moving in slow motion today; the sun is weighing down my limbs more than the bag of trees around my waist. I have to force my feet to continue marching, every step is punishment. I haven't seen anyone for hours, and this situation, like the swamp I am knee deep in, strikes me as ludicrous. Suddenly the sun and the flies and the swamp I am mucking through all gang up against me, and my expression darkens. I hate this job; I hate the trees, the blackflies, the sun, this swamp, and the blackflies. I take a spruce out of my treebag and begin to automatically bend, push, stamp but my energy shifts and I fling the tree as far as I can instead, crushing the root plug mercilessly as I do so. In this random fit of anger, I steal any chance it might have had at survival.

I look at the faces in the flickering firelight circle that evening. They are the people I've lived with for a month, exchanged a few sentences and grimaces and wounds. I know them better than I'll ever know some friends, because I see their raw sides, and have watched them suffer and triumph. But I realize, as the fire catches their faces then releases them, that I don't really know them either; because we all respond to nature in different and private ways. I stand up and leave the crackling fire, walking to my tent. It's impossible not to look up. The stars fill the sky where the trees end, and the lake imitates their meeting. I am reminded of the sunset, of the sharp cold water in the lake, of the beauty of the land around my tent. The feeling of elation after running, and falling, and then running again down the hill to catch the van when the day is over. The way the air

smells in the morning, drinking tea on the cliff, smelling the fire's smoke in all my clothes. Something fills my mouth and I want to shout, but there's nothing to say. I know that tomorrow I will not be able to find the tree that I crushed, and threw; but I will plant a thousand more instead. Tomorrow, and the day after. I step forward onto the pine needles and the forest swallows me.

* * *

It doesn't always change things, changing your mind. It doesn't make it any easier to get up at six every morning, or to convince your muscles that it will soon be over. Your brain fights most of the battle, though, and after that it's just a matter of dragging your body behind, with all the complaining bones and arguing limbs. You have to look for the wood trolls in order to make the blackflies disappear. And then duct-tape the hole in your tent, the tear in your pants, and your hand to your shovel, and keep going.

* * *

Sometimes, during the most endless parts of the day, I would make up mind games and play them with myself. Trying to name everyone in my grade one class. Changing the lyrics of familiar songs. And treeplanting words, A to Z. That one we played the most, sometimes with things that we loved or things that we hated. Anything, really, to distract ourselves from reality. I would have composed a whole story if I thought it might save my sanity. I reach down into my coat pocket to find a piece of gum, and feel instead the half-broken body of a little black spruce. I carefully pick up the tree and stare at it. One side is nearly nude of its small needles and the roots are bent; it's incredible that it made it this far, actually. I give the tree a silent congratulations. I think I'll plant it when I get home. And it's a good thing I was taking the train instead of flying, cause that's how long it took me to finish the alphabet.

R is for Reefer, where the treerunner keeps his trees. S is for Shovel; it had become another appendage and my right hand feels oddly naked without it. T is for Treetruck. U is for Underwater. V is for Vans. Once Matthew and I found an old, abandoned bus in the woods painted in greens and browns. It held a bed of sorts, a fridge and a stove, too. Curly painted letters on the outside declared the bus as Whisky Jack's and that's W. X marked the spot seconds before my shovel carved a hole. Y is for Yesterday, and memories, and pictures because now that's all I have left. The little tree pokes bravely out of my front lawn, barely taller than the nearby dandelions. It looks odd without a hundred and a thousand more surrounding it, placed roughly six feet apart and following my footprints for miles. A single black spruce forest, beside the sidewalk on my front lawn. Sometimes, just surviving is enough. Suddenly I realize that I'm still wearing my steel-toed boots, that I'm home and that I never did get to Z.

Thirteen

Rings loud the bells,
thirteen times,
for thirteen hells,
for dead and dying,
for lying in wait,
remembering times,
that we celebrate.
Fast forward a life,
each does his own,
the criers are crying,
the dying have moaned.
Thirteen times,
the bells chime their fear,
for thirteen lost,
whom all loved so dear.
Widows and friends,
fathers and mothers,
cry now dear sister,
cry now dear brother,
cry now you peasants,
cry for the others,
wipe off the tears,
you make for your lovers,
tuck the kids in,
say your goodnights,
the monster is lurking,
beware of his bite.

Joe Haveman

nacho

You rubbed your green eyes
with jalapeno-stained fingers.
I laughed and told you not to cry.
You let me hold your head
in the steamy shower
as you flushed
the pepper-juice out
and I am a better person for it.

Brent Van Staaldhuizen

Dust

The calendar reads August,
November's in the air.
Silence hanging, layered dust
Collecting everywhere.
Furniture of ancient pine
Stands to guard respect;
Memories locked deep within
Inwardly circumspect.
In these walls, a child's heart
Grew with passing time
Until the day came to part,
She is no longer mine.
Ghosts of dreams she dared effect
The day her childhood died.
Now the layered dust collects
Where only dreams reside.

Kristy Whalen

Summer, 1998

I stand and shiver
and beckon with dripping fingers
to the waiting child on the ledge.
I'll catch her, I promise.

And she splashes.
The water, warm as firelight, crackles.
A thousand droplets of flame
kill the cold breeze.

Safe in my arms
I hold a laughing, gasping child
and wipe her sunburned face
free from water.

For only a moment
I lean my cheek towards her sodden
sun streaked hair. Her arms
wrap around my neck.

Her breath rattles
through her soaked lungs, her limbs
tremble until they grow warm
against my skin.

She reaches out
to pull herself away. The water
assaults my arms and chest
where I held her.

I stand and shiver
reaching for the coughing child I
will catch— for a season. Water
drips down my face.

Karen Horlings

Revelation

Revealed
My tailored shackles
Heaped on the bent weeping grass
At my living feet
Infinitesimal pins of the rain
Split themselves
On my heaving chest
Rolling past those parts below
Dripping from each shin's sudden hairs
To the pious grass
A constant kissing
Like the whole body were "waking up"
To taste its circulation
A sensual purity
In pure sensation
Chaste and real
Feeling for once
At once
Every forgotten part
As inside and out
I open my eyes
Naked in the rain

Brett Dewing

Success

An office building with
Mirrored windows stands,
Classy, and looming; the sun
Glazes from its surface
A willowy, blond woman
—Sporting a crimson business suit,
High heels, and ‘cherry blast’ lipstick—
Snuffs her Virginia Slim
On the cool ashen brick wall.
She shoves open the double glass doors,
Avoiding the crumpled little man.
Once inside, her mouth slightly ajar,
She expels a tar-laden exhalation
Puffs out her rouged cheeks,
Squints her eyes (creasing her age lines), and
Flashes her bleached-white teeth.
Every day, sitting under the overhang
He shakes the pennies
In his outstretched hand.
A burlap bag weighs down
His already sagging shoulders.
Charcoal dirt smudges his weathered face.
He wheezes putrid breath
At all who rush by
From his pasty mouth with
Yellow-stained cracked teeth.
‘Just one russet penny, if you please.’
Successfully evasive, the dame
Takes the elevator to the penthouse floor.

Amanda C. Paterson

Untitled

A Peter Pan
For the new millennium
A worn out couch and
Blanket, two of his favourite friends.
Each night:
Some Pixie Dust,
A bottle of beer, or two, three, four.
The TV talks to him.
Near the end of the night
Never Never Land calls his name.

The morning beckons rudely.
Unfinished work crumpled into
A stained knapsack.
No water meets his body,
And his greasy head bobs in class.

Another time, a boy child,
Who dreamed: A motor cross racer.
A doctor.
"Maybe even a scientist, mom."

Now the boy, not yet a man,
Is idle and failing.
Hanging with the lost boys,
Partying and
Foolishly thinking
He'll fly straight on till morning.

Jennifer Veenstra

intoxication

i am drunk on you
and in my delirium
i dance
with you
in a ballroom
as an orchestra moves
our floating steps as one
as your strong arm curves
round the richness of my gown

i dance myself
out of a dream
and as i awake i come to know
that you are with her
in the spotlight and
i
sit on the sidelines
alone

Judith Byl

Untitled

Al Bick

The man stands placidly on the platform, black leather briefcase held loosely at the end of a pin-striped silk sleeve. He's late, but he can't hurry up and go, the popular reaction to life. He has to stand and wait. He could sit, there is no one else there, but he stands. Unlike most subway stations, this one is clean, well-lit. No trash, paper or biological, has been windswept into shadowed corners. Clean, decent with bright plastic primary colours adorning the walls, floors, everything. It would make a great daycare if one cared to add a half-dozen cheerful women in no-nonsense pants, scattered across the room as so many modern statuary. And a slight taste of urine to the air.

But the air is clean and fresh with just a hint of chemicals.

He suddenly starts and vigorously shakes his head, causing his tie to wobble back and forth. He steps backwards, turns completely around, and slowly backs towards the entrance. The cause for his sudden alarm is not visible, but the man is clearly afraid of something. He suddenly breaks for the clearly marked exit. His legs piston up and forward in a relentless motion and beads of sweat trickle down his brow. His glorious exit is abruptly stopped due to the turnstile bars being locked in place.

The man, now viewed in profile, executes a comic fall of epic proportions. His body, one second rocketing forward, is next seen hurtling down, a change in direction as violent as it is unforeseen. The arms jut out in all directions at once, willing the man to fly. The briefcase is actually seen to fly, the talented offspring of retarded parents. The legs stop dead in space and the lips and eyeballs flay in all direction. His body thunders to the waxed surface, arms spread wide, as if to embrace the faded yellow tile in a final lover's grasp. The much abused turnstile collapses to the floor to mingle with the two lovers, not belonging but there, taking up space. The screech and scrinch of abused metal fills the room, momentarily displacing the soul-wearying muzak that filters out of hidden speakers, and echoes its way down the subway tunnel system. The sound does not make it far before the crush of an oncoming train destroys it in its entirety. The train rushes into the station.

Doors open, doors hit their metallic stops, all is still.

No one filters out of the train and no one is there to filter onto the train. The cars are empty but for the primary colours screaming into the empty seats.

again

she is quiet too long conversation
ends, now it's just you talking
quietly at first

consumed with your own words until
it wouldn't matter if she left you
are consumed with words

they grow larger, spilling out over
her, swollen words like
pride grown larger

then it's quiet you have used up
all your vocabulary but she
was quiet all along

Angela Reitsma

To Touch the Stars

This morning I looked up and saw
The shining morning star.
And, when compared to yesterday,
It did not seem so far.
In fact, it shone so very near,
And just above the trees,
That, listening, I thought to hear
It singing with the breeze.
But, though I strain on tippy-toe,
It stays above my touch.
Fractions to go; I strain; I know
Success could hurt so much.
It's almost like a dream I had
That lingered after dawn:
A faith instilled, unmet and sad,
But hope carries it on.
I thought; I gazed upon that star
If you were here with me
Maybe you could reach that far,
You're taller, don't you see.

Kristy Whalen

North

This is no land of feminine
curves, of sloping
hillsides, nor of pointless
concession roads and orderly
farm fields—

This is no land of childish
games, of lazy
rivers, nor of artificial
ponds and bland
pastures dotted with cows.

Here instead
jagged upthrust rocks
dominate the landscape
which is masculine as broad
shoulders, feet set
apart, work-roughened
palms— brutal, blunt, honest
as a quick axe blow. .

Pine trees
with needles to obstruct the unwary
swamps that swallow
and lakes that drown—
no ladies here.

It's a man's game, and
should you choose to play,
you'd best be cautious—
weak women and careless children
(of the South)
go first.

Rietje van Arragon

Fiction Writer

Faith Hicks

Part I: Looking for Kurtz

[*Scorp*- n. noun: formerly derogatory term for the media, coined in 1994 from the novel *Primary Colors*, by Anonymous. Related words:

Media, journalist, newspaper, Internet, writer, truth, fact, etc.]

-*Webster's Encyclopedia*, Oct. 7, 2019

Slow.

It begins like that old song I almost know. . . that archaic creature that belonged to some past time, an old music that you can beat out upon the table in front of you, your fingers drumming the perfect tempo. It begins like that, slow, a building, a reaching, a whisper. It is nothingness coming to a horrible head, and then, just as you almost think I can't bear it; it must burst out like shattered bone beneath the skin. . . it does . . . and the music stabs across the empty plane, it's all you can think, all you can feel all you can taste, against the light screaming above. I bow my head below it all, staring at nothing, nothing staring back, music shrieking and the only thing I can think to say is "why not louder? I mean, why not? It's not like we hear it, it's not like that's us, bellowing about pain and torment. That's not our pain in the singer's voice, not us, God forbid it would be us, it's another pain, another pain separate from us, outside us, outside God, outside just play it louder I can still think."

Bodies against the lights, against the prism colours. Hold them up to the lights and they become transparent, the body separates from the skin. It peels away like an orange peel, and I can see the tasty flesh beneath. I can see it all, the bones, their bird bones, all laced with neon lights, bones no longer white but painted blue and yellow and green, the colour of the strobe that checkers the dance floor. The music and the light, beating its own separate perverted song. It's a perfect tempo, and I can feel it... as closely as I feel my own heart.

"G***!"

Someone to my right, pushed up against the bar, drink in one hand, a pound of flesh in the other. Stripped flesh, bare shoulders, clothes nitpicked away by the pecking eyes of those around her. Pecking, pecking, eyes like chicken eyes they surround her, stares that say want, say need, needing flesh, but she is untouchable, her arm around another man. "Trade you my mind for your body," I wryly think, looking away, but the offer is hollow. It would be a bad trade, on my part. Trade the future for the now, riches for enjoyment, and I'd regret it. You only go so far with a body. But I can scrape heaven with my mind.

The tempo changes, the light squirrels away. It screams home late and troubled and there is only cheerful darkness patting my cheek. A moment of time, the barest fraction, the music skips and howls and the bodies freeze, pose, pause. They've forgotten how to dance, and stand awkwardly on their strings, dyed hair and shaded eyes frozen for that pristine moment. It stretches, intolerably, horribly, their legs waver and shudder in non-movement, *how long can they stand like that?* the skipping beat of the broken music the only hint that they were once alive, not preserved wax figures, preserved in their museum poses as morbid examples of twenty-first century fashion.

I grin. I can't help it, you know, I can't help but find humor in it. I peer into the silence with quiet ease. I've heard it before. It isn't a friend, but I know it. It is not unfamiliar.

Then, salvation. The music grinds in animalistic fury and tears and finally sounds. It rises up and over, hard and easy, and we are granted reprieve. No thought, no thinking, and I lift my glass

to my mouth, smiling impishly. Save it. A rainy day might come, and you might have to bare your neon-stained souls.

"Another?" Inquires the bartender, eyes lit with music. He doesn't shout. He knows how to speak above it all without shouting. I shake my head, still peering into my empty glass.

"Driving tonight?" he asks, smiling knowingly. I glance at him. Shake my head again. Leave me alone, I think. Leave me alone or I'll hurt you. You think the music hurts? You think you can feel what they're singing about, that insipid pain of yesteryear, that pathetic forgotten agony of a different era? No? Well, I can make you feel that, you know.

So leave me alone.

He knows. An instant I had him, and he knew. He moves away, into the music, along the bar, gliding away into the lights. I watch him go, and wait until he breaks eye contact. He moves to another customer, half-full glass sitting optimistically by their side. I see the tension in his shoulders, his eagerness to tell, to share. I read his lips as he leans over to the customer, who must care.

"Scorp."

That's the only word I catch. It's the only one I need though. I turn away.

"Dev."

My name, spoken by a familiar voice, ricochets away from the music, and is poured unwillingly in my ear.

Uh... *ohh*. I'm not quite sure what else to think.

"Are you drunk?" Grey asks.

"I wish," I sniff. He doesn't sit down, just peers at me from high above, from under that shock of silver hair, watching me with steady eyes. I look up, suddenly mad, mad because he's taller than me, which he always has been, but now it digs at me, as though he's grown on purpose. I spin around on my stool, looking away, over towards the lights and the twisting bodies. What's he doing here?

"Dev..."

"That's my name," I say, still looking out, out there, out where, out anyplace but his face. Yeah, my name, all laced with identity and truth. Mine mine mine. Mine and no one else's. No one else called Dev short for Devon or Devil take your pick... Depends on the mood, I suppose. Cue rolling eyes.

He sits down beside me, his dark overcoat wet and shiny from outside rain. He's looking at me, I can feel it, but the look is non-judgmental, casual.

"You're pale. Have you eaten today?"

"Not hungry. I don't know. I feel sick, a bit. Maybe it's that bug that's going around the office. Ray had it last week. I saw him throw up."

Grey twists, looking towards the lights and music and gyrating bodies. I can read him, can feel what he's thinking, the worry tracing his eyes, but that's not being a Scorp, that's being a friend. I've known him forever, for as long as I can remember, which isn't long at all. I've known him since I woke up. Since I opened my eyes and found I was lying in an alleyway, in a puddle of blood, wallet missing and a hole in my stomach. I've known him since I thought back, and couldn't remember what I was thinking back to, and thought, perhaps it was best not to think, not to trip through the darkness that hissed at the edge of my mind. That's forever for me. Four years. I'm older than that, but four years is all I have.

"Why are you here, Dev?"

"I don't know," I say miserably. "I just didn't want to go home."

"You could've come to my place."

Yeah, I think, I could have. I glance downward, carefully, at his hand on his knee. I try to look out of the corner of my eye, but he moves his hand away, suddenly self-conscious, and I know he's seen me looking. The ring isn't there, of course, no reason why he would still wear it, but I can see the paler flesh on his finger, where it used to be.

"Look, Grey. . ."

"It's okay," he says suddenly. A scar, raw and barely healed, floats behind his eyes. I frown at the dancers, at the lights. Why had he loved her? She wasn't a Scorp. She didn't understand. She never could.

He rises, perhaps the movement is meant to cover something, but when I glance up, there is nothing in his gaze.

"Come on. We're needed."

I start, staring at him.

"What? It's Sunday. We're off. . ."

"Not according to Solomon. Ray's been missing for almost two days, and we get to cover the South."

"*Shit*. Solomon can *screw* himself. I'm not going to work on a Sunday. Get someone else to scorp the truth."

The music is humming again. . . humming into the beginning of another song. Humming in tune with memories, a perfectly preserved museum of the past. Arms on the floor are raised in silence as they listen. Listen to the edge of the song, of the rising tempo. What is it? Name that tune, that song, that beat, that remembrance. . . And right then, I do feel sick. Really really ill, sicker than I'd ever felt before. Sick inside.

"Shit..." I say again, almost wanting to cry. The word is hollow. I can hear it echo with hollowness.

Grey puts a hand on my arm. I'm not sure why, because he never touches me. I flinch, but it's a reflex, not personal. He steps away.

"Sorry."

"I hate this place."

"I know. Here..."

He pulls his overcoat off and drapes it over my shoulders. I am now drowning in blackness, but in some distant way, am glad for it.

"Thanks," I say.

"Your coat's in the car. Not far to walk, just around the corner."

"Thanks," I say again. I pull his overcoat around me. Realize how cold I was. Realize how damp and ugly the bar is in the pauses between light shows. I wonder what it looks like during the day, stripped of all its glamour. I decide not to come back.

The music follows us out. This time, though, I don't bother to listen to the words. I can still hear them, though. The words that you can beat out in perfect time, drum with your fingers on your tabletop or your car window. Words that don't mean anything in this era, but sound almost comforting.

Part II: Light on a Nighttime Planet

There is a dragon made of neon lights across the street. It is the Oriental interpretation, its great feathered head bowed to the street, glowing eyes lidded with benevolence. Its flickering teeth

are bared, a curved snarl of angry wisdom, and with each surge of electricity, it seems to turn its head to peer below. It is the only colour on the rain-slicked street, garish yellow and orange spilled in a brilliant cacophony wherever you look. The buildings surrounding it are all dark. Their open windows are yawning mouths tilted to catch the spitting downfall.

Detective Scott watches it for a moment, cop's fedora shrugged back on his cop's head, squinting into the rain. There was something unnervingly holy about the dragon's silence, as though it has seen far too much in its past lives, yet somehow is unaffected by it all. An outsider to the squalor it witnesses, neon heart beating with empty contentment.

"Hey!" roars Kubrick, from across the street, the collar of his long windbreaker held up in pitiful defense against the rain. He stands with a hand on the building's door, the right side of his face painted yellow in the dragon's glow.

"You coming in or staying here? I'm not gonna spoon feed you chicken soup when you catch flu."

Charming as always.

Scott hunches his shoulders and trots across the road, elbowing his way as pleasantly as possible through the bystanders which have gathered. Dirty looks stab in his direction, then melt away when they see the badge clipped primly to his coat lapel. Unlike the crowd, legitimate reasons draw him to the building. For them it's all entertainment, the fun of blood and murder. Spill a little and they will come hunting, noses pressed to the sickly scent.

He reaches Kubrick, following the other inside, the door screaming on rusty hinges. Kubrick doesn't notice the noise, standing in the lobby to shake himself like a wet dog, droplets slinging off onto the moldy floor.

"Bloody nice place," Kubrick says, but the sarcasm carries an alien note of awe.

The building could have been beautiful once. Gothic, Scott thinks, whatever that word means nowadays. The black cherry of long unpolished wood gleams dully at him from every corner, spider-webbed and scuffed, but wood is never used for building any more. . . It lies dormant and quiet, beauty beneath the filth, a swan buried by gray, stained feathers. He pauses, looking around, then wrinkles his nose. The wood smells, oddly, he thinks, and sniffs again, as though he can catch the scent, the smell that has drawn the outside crowd. As though he can smell the blood allegedly staining it. No, not that. It couldn't be that. Blood smells different. This is old. An old dead smell, long decayed and past. A scent of deadness, perhaps. Perhaps this is what deadness smells like. Dead history, dead past, not just a murder, a butchering of yesteryear. He grins suddenly, a selfish, foolish grin, straightening, to shrug at Kubrick, glad the other man could not read his thoughts. It must have been that Chinese dragon, peering down at him with cynically wise eyes. Peeked into his mind and force-fed him melancholy. Must've been.

"Old hotel," Kubrick says, and taps nonchalantly on the registrar desk. Paint flecks come off on his fingers and he peers at them, disgusted.

"There's oak under this! Do you bloody know what wood costs nowadays? This is the real McCoy, not that vatgrown junk. Real stuff. Grown in some real forest where all the pretty little birdies frolicked... I can't believe these people."

"Different era, different time," says Scott quietly, stuffing his hands in his overcoat pockets, and shrugging. He was good at that; shrugging, making like he didn't care, like nothing fazed him. He was untouchable. It was a good thing to be, all wrapped in "I don't care."

"It isn't our place to judge. People did all sorts of strange things back when."

Kubrick glances at him sideways, black eyes bright in the police lights, spread across the old lobby like diamonds on a beach. They were brilliant, illuminating dark corners, dragging all to light. It was almost too much to bear, the brightness of it all. Kubrick still stares. It is now Kubrick's turn

to shrug, the easy communication of those on the job, but he doesn't, just glances back down at the desk. Scott hears him muttering something, about freaking A' morons and how they all shoulda just been shot. . .

There is the heavy sound of footsteps, and both men turn, seeing one of their own walk gingerly down from the stairs at the end of the lobby. A bulky man, career foot cop, bound to the streets and his patrol, stepping with exaggerated care on the hotel's rat-eaten carpeted stairs.

"What's going on?" says Kubrick, his tone more brisk than annoyed. Words to him are nothing. They have no power. They simply are what they are; bare, slight tools to be used in any such way. The foot cop joins them, his heavy-lidded eyes flickering over each man in turn. His glance is unappreciative and uncaring. Perhaps he does not recognize them, perhaps his dull gaze has skipped over their badges, for he pauses before he speaks, and his tone is halting.

"Crime upstairs, Dectecs. . . I dunno. . . Strange way ta go."

"Then why are we here?" Kubrick says. He fidgets, throwing back his head and tilting it, a manner of importance, and also of impatience. Scott almost sighs.

"We aren't the bleeding cleaners. We're here for a murder. You gonna tell us what's up or no?"

The cop's gaze rakes him with quiet melancholy, then trails slowly towards Scott, who smiles encouragingly.

"What do you have, Officer?" he asks, and his voice is crisply neutral. The foot cop responds to this, grudgingly, knowing all too well the tone is false, but still speaks.

"One dead," he says, and his voice carries a sing-song quality, one of quiet neutrality, "male, approx mid-thirties, no identifications. Bullet wound to the head. Nothing really special, but. . ." and the cop pauses, as though drawing out a thread of unwilling fact. "Well... it's odd. You'll have to come up to see. It's . . . odd."

He turns confused eyes upon the detectives, watery and plain, the spark of human intelligence muted by their swampy depths. Scott glances at Kubrick and shrugs.

"Detectives. . ."

They had entered with an uncanny silence, the door hinges muted in obedience. The word of introduction is the only sign of their presence, and Scott resists the urge to jump. Calmly he turns, one foot after the other.

Odd. . . though, he thinks to himself, he really should have known. There was something wrong in this building, just upstairs, a mangling of fiction and fact. A crime of wrongness had been committed, and must be controlled, the wildly flailing loose ends of truth tied off into the most pristine of knots.

Scorps. You wouldn't call them that to their face, but they all knew the name.

The man was quite tall, and though rain speckled his silver hair, Scott would not have been surprised if it had refused to fall upon him. He was not particularly old, not by any standards, and Scott saw that the man must have grayed prematurely, the harshness of making fiction turn into truth fraying him beyond his years.

The woman was too young. Droplets bejeweled her dark head, the knotted curls pulled back into a tight ponytail that tilted her eyes. But then, no, her eyes were already tilted, Oriental heritage likely, but they were also shaped with a quiet knowledge.

"Who're you?"

Oh no, thinks Scott, wishing Kubrick would suddenly burst into flames, or drop dead, a departure of biblical proportions.

The man reaches into his overcoat and pulls out his ID. The emblem on the badge turns Kubrick's face. He swallows, and glances from it to the man's quiet gaze. The Scorp's errant silver

hair hangs in his face, making eye contact almost difficult.

"I-I wasn't aware that Scor-um. . . the Department had sent you. . ."

"They didn't," says the man. "I'm afraid this is out of our jurisdiction. I'm Grey and this is Dev. Usually we're North."

Scott watches them carefully. The man's coat is long and dark and of a brand name that Scott has always admired from a distance. Scorps always got a large part of the Department's budget, mostly because good ones were hard to come by. . . But he has heard things about these two. Rumors... Things whispered over lunch and behind upraised hands. About the woman, who just appeared one night on the Department stairs, who knew nothing about anything and could remember nothing about herself, yet with a look could slice your soul.

He glances over at her. She's a girl, really, too thin and small to be frightening, and at second glance he realizes she can't be older than eighteen. She is wearing an old bomber jacket, leather worn at the elbows, but Scott knows it must be real.

She must have known he was looking at her, for her hand, porcelain pale next to the blackness of her hair, darts up suddenly, to brush away an errant curl. The movement is self-conscious, an actress performing for an unwanted audience. She *knew* he was looking at her.

"And today you're South because. . .?" Kubrick's back is up, bristling. He has been stricken in front of lessers, the foot cop watching with a curious stare, and scrambles to assert dominance. Scott finds himself sighing.

"Ray Fuiro has vanished," Grey, the man, says, and suddenly he shifts his pose, only slightly, thrusting hands into overcoat pockets, but his head tilts with the movement. He is taller than the other men, and peers calmly down his nose. Scott recognizes the expression. The Scorp is annoyed.

"No one knows where or why. We fill in for the South until the matter is resolved."

"Oh. . ." Kubrick pauses. Scott looks at Grey again, harder, feeling something cold creep up his back. There have been rumors about him, too. Not as mysterious as the young woman, but... He is afraid of rumors. Too often they twist into truth.

"We aren't official replacement, but we're all for the moment."

"Jeeze," says Kubrick, more to himself. "I know Ray. Bloody good Scorp, that guy. Wonder why he jumped ship."

"Maybe someone fed him a lie," says the girl, and all eyes turn on her. She smiles, or rather, the edges of her mouth turn up, for nothing touches her eyes. They are very bright green and large, dominating her face, and turn from one stare to the next, holding each in turn.

"Did you see the way they looked at me? Like I was some sort of freak."

She stands with one toe in a puddle of dried blood, hands clasped behind her. Her head is down, and the words are muted. Like how she feels. Muted, like someone pressed the 'silence' button on the TV remote, and still the faces on-screen prattled forward, mouths gulping for air. She wraps her arms around herself, fingers feeling ribs beneath the oversized jacket, watching Grey's back as he bent gingerly over the body.

"Dev, if you insist on making those kind of comments, of course they're going to look at you strangely. You can't expect them to understand." He does not glance up, and she starts to bristle, like what that idiot cop did, angry at his tone. He's talking to her like she's a kid. She doesn't want to let it slide, not his stab at her, not anything. She wants to remember it all and be brilliantly angry, to feel it rise and spit out with cleansing force. Especially after the way he drove them here, after the call on his cellphone, with her clinging to the car seat, knuckles white, muttering "*Grey!*" every time

they crashed through a red light.

"Mother of . . . " he drops the edge of the throw cloth. He raises his hand to his face, then hesitates, as though he's unsure as to what to do with it. "Too late. I . . . "

No, she thinks. Complications rise, drowning her. Over the body, his head bows. . . as if in prayer, yes, I will pray, and we'll go home, and not have to worry. Behind her back, she twists her hands. I'll pray for you so you won't have to, and we can be left alone on this Sunday night, doing whatever it is normal people do.

"What?" she says. "What is it?"

"This gunshot's self inflicted."

Oh. "Oh," she says, relieved. "Is that all?"

"It's Ray. He's shot himself."

"What is going *on* over there?"

The cop's voice is loud enough for her to hear, the pitch tilted upwards into a half whine. Tell me, his tone spits, let me join. I want to ring around the rosy with you too, as together we hush a hush a all fall down. She signs. Grey's head is still bowed, still silent, and she thinks her prayer must have come too late. Something has been torn, though she's not sure what.

"He's old enough to be her father, for *fu--*"

"Kubrick," The second voice is tired, but still carries a warning.

It was the other cop's voice, the older one, with sandy hair and sandy eyes and a gaze that meant more than what she first thought. She decides she must like him, that she must ally herself with him. It's better than having no ally at all. She is suddenly cold, and wraps her arms around herself, feeling her ribs under the jacket, the sharp painted on bones that looked as though they had been traced by an artist's brush. She squeezes her eyes shut, then opens them. They are dry. No tears. Of course not.

In the room, dark and horrible though it is, there are windows. They are all covered up, as the building is condemned, but there are gaps between the nailed slats. Light slants through the windows still, orange light, light which is alive with electricity. She could put out a hand to touch it. It would be like putting her fingers into pure moonbeams, cupping starlight in her scarred palms.

Maybe, she thinks, maybe that was what Ray saw. Maybe he came here because he knew of the building and the beauty it almost promises, and the light coming in from the dragon. He might not have felt all the darkness then as he stood there with electricity trailing across him.

"Grey. . . Let's go."

"I don't get it," mutters Kubrick. He stands under the awning of the old hotel, collar of his coat half-hiding his face. "It doesn't ring *true*. I thought they couldn't feel. But that guy, Grey or whatever, he looked like his dog just died. And why were they here, anyway? There wasn't a problem, just a suicide. It was like they were looking for something."

"Maybe he knew Furio," Scott says. The rain is still falling, and the last of the bystanders have wandered away, unwilling to further brave the elements. The blood was no longer sounding. Truth had been brought before the stunning police lights. It was never as interesting as unsolved blood.

"Yeah, but I mean there's a difference between knowing and knowing if you know what I mean. I'd met Ray a few times, but it's impossible to get close to a Scorp, y'know? I swear there's some truth to that stupid myth, about them all having mechanical hearts. They're almost. . . I dunno, less than human."

Kubrick grins suddenly, staring out over the dim street.

"But when you think about it Scott, if they can't feel, like everyone's been told, then why'd

Ray go and eat a bullet? I'm no psychologist, but suicide's always been the last resort of a drowning man. Am I making sense to you? Scott? You listening to me?"

Across the street, the neon dragon grins at him. Strange, he hadn't thought it was smiling before, but now he can see the curl of the feathered lips, teeth bared in mirth. It bows and nods at him, and electricity brightens its hollow eyes. He wonders suddenly if it were silenced, if the umbilical cord of light were ripped from its belly, could it continue to live?

Once more, the dragon bows, and its laughter fades, leaving only the sound of the drumming rain.

[Note from the editors: for the purpose of this publication, Faith's story has been somewhat edited. For the original version of the story, please see Faith's website: www.iprimus.ca/~dnhicks]

Heterogeneity

News.

Not the wisdom, lost to knowledge,
lost to information,

But tidings.

Some joyous, while others
to our concave eyes
not only reflect but focus

The darkness.

All are acetone
dissolving generation gaps:
Children grow;
Parents age;
Loved ones die.

Tears of grief are shed at our
goings-out;

Tears of joy are shed at our
comings-in.

These waters leave us,
to mingle—
for a time— with the news,

But never mix

Joining instead the tears of those
who have gone before.

Rosanna Hessels

ubiqui(nativi)ty

Christ was born in Belleville
When all the world was taxed

And an angel in a green-striped toque
Proclaimed it in a farmer's bass

To the shepherds of Sarnia
And the wisemen of Guelph

Who parked their American cars
In the misting morning

And the snow stained red
With his waiting sacrifice

Brett Dewing

Walk— Don't Run

She takes the boardwalk
Planks creak beneath her feet
She pushes onward
Sits upon a rock
Light flashes fades
Flashes fades
Blinds out the stars
Sparkles the water
She spoons New York Cherry Cheesecake Ice-cream
Absently to her lips
Small ripples lap
Terns alight the crystal
Wind-blown hair
Forgotten Ice-cream
Tear-stained face
She lopes along the rocky pier
Homeward

Amanda C. Paterson

twenty paces

Twenty paces from the stampede, the anvil-solid rule. Peel off
my tattered white tee (stripping a burrito), and I'm
hot, searing, as if I could iron clothes with
the flaked cherry-red of my back.

summer

Unroll myself onto the towel, savour the way
the oven-sandy heat seemingly seeps through it,
then dissipates as shadow denies the heat source.
Euphoric, I adore the red-orange glow that owns my senses.

spectacular

Snapped back to the stampede. Umbrellas enough for a circus
of elephants garbed in relaxed, vertical striped,
mid-life uniforms. Perpetually denied elegance is
manifest through polyester and elastic waistbands.

simple

Pack mule productions, laden with
chairs and coolers, sustenance earned by porting
veggie-thins and jelly-sandals. Herd to bathe,
profess only shower-caps and breaststroke.

spontaneous

Eternally youthful, denial of white zinc noses. Neon tracers
zip as water-wings levitate baby sister atop surf-foam and wave
crests. Plum-purple lips from endless swim sessions, the caramel
cherubim's faded crow's feet laugh at my sunburn.

Brent Van Staalduin

everafter lost

if for a moment she said
 help me — i'm tired — i can't
and slipped armour to the ground
 that she might rest
that brittle bones might rest
 then in that moment
 would she rest? —
or maybe — as she expects —
a noble knight would come
 see her naked soul
 and not be noble anymore

Judith Byl

Words Unspoken; Things Left Unsaid

Hannah Helder

The first time I saw her was from across the room at Sylvia and Roger's party, and though I'd never met her before, I knew that you would leave me for her. She had come from the kitchen and paused in the doorway, half of her face obscured in the shadows of the dancing candle light. She was not beautiful but when she half smiled to no one in particular she was bewitching. You hadn't seen her yet and kept talking to Roger about hockey. I felt dizzy and remember fumbling for the edge of the table. You quickly turned to me, asking if I was all right, and headed out of my life to the kitchen to get me a glass of water.

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Conversation and music fill the coffee shop, but an awkward pause hangs between us. I refuse to help you out, but stare silently out the window at the middle-aged woman waiting for the bus. The wind whips around her and she struggles to do up her long, brown jacket without putting down her shopping bags. You stare into the bottom of your coffee cup, as if hoping you can leap into the murky liquid and resurface into a different life. I almost take pity on you and am ready to provide you with your excuses, but then the bus comes, and the woman disappears into it with her bulky bags and frazzled hair. The bus speeds her away and the sidewalk is left empty, as if she had never waited there.

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You came back with a glass of water and brought me to the couch. The two women already sitting there obligingly made room for me but not you. You pulled a footstool over to sit on at my feet, and asked if there was anything else that I needed. I felt something close to pity at your unwitting ignorance and disregarded the urge to clutch your hand and beg you to never leave me.

Knowing you were already lost, I let my heart freeze slowly with each pulsing beat.

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We had spent so long filling each other with empty words that we never even noticed when the poison ones started. Even now I find it difficult to determine if those destroying words started before or after she appeared. Did we start to infect each other long before and I am only using her as a convenient excuse? Or did the venom seep in after she slipped between us?

Those inky, oily words we spoke oozed over our skin, coating us in a seemingly-beautiful, iridescent glaze. They slid into our veins, and dripped deep into the caverns of our bowels, polluting us from within, while we, unaware, maintained an artificial, mesmerizing dialogue.

* * *

You are so afraid to speak the words that you think will hurt me. You still stare into your mug in this nondescript coffee shop.

The girl sitting at the next table pretends to be reading a magazine with a thin, big-chested woman on the cover, but I can tell she's waiting for one of us to speak again. I want to turn to her and tell her to mind her own business, but unexpectedly find that I don't care enough to do so. I suddenly feel the urge to make a huge scene--just to entertain her. I look down to hide the grin I can barely contain at the thought.

You lean forward, concerned. You must imagine it's tears that I am hiding. Don't you know that your words no longer hurt me? That your telling me that you don't love me hurts me less than when you told me you did?

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I closed my eyes and told you to go and enjoy the party. The music thumped dully in my head, anguished and tortured, when you rested your hand on my knee and then left. I'll come check on you in a while, you told me. The women beside me laughed at some muted joke, and beer bottles rattled against each other across the room. A candle flame seared through my eyelids, angry crimson and violet, but when I opened my eyes the room was still intimately shadowed, and I felt vulnerable and alone.

By the kitchen you were shaking her hand as Roger made introductions.

* * *

I'm sorry, you say.

I look at you blankly, knowing my non-responsiveness hurts you more than my tears ever could. Does it challenge your manhood? Undermine your confidence? It must make you wonder if I ever loved you. I allow myself an inward smile at the melodrama.

I thought we might be able to talk about things, you try again.

I think I hear pleading in your voice, almost desperation. I stare out the window and watch the street lights flick on, one by one, all the way down the street.

What's there to talk about, or to be sorry about? I say lightly, still staring out the window. In the reflection I can see the girl at the next table watching with sideways, feline eyes. She catches my gaze, and makes a show of selecting a new magazine from a stack in front of her. I turn back to you, half smiling.

Outside, the apartment buildings down the street reflect the last light of the setting sun, fiery, angry flames in the windows. Below, between the buildings, murky shadows crowd the sidewalks. It is that hazy middle time, neither night nor day.

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You thought you broke my heart when you told me that you didn't love me, but you broke it a thousand times before when you told me that you did.

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Words are weapons, I told you. And you laughed at me and lightly bit my ear lobe. Guns, swords, knives are weapons, you said.

But words get inside of you. They penetrate your soul and eat away at it without you noticing, until you look into your soul for strength and find you have none. If you don't protect yourself you might soon find that you don't even have a soul.

You laughed at my dire warning and tried to make me laugh too, by throwing me over your shoulder and spinning me around before dropping me on the unmade bed.

* * *

I watched from across the room as she threw back her head and laughed at some joke you made. Her teeth gleamed in the dim light and the music carried her laughter over my tears. You grinned in your sort of embarrassed way, and ran your fingers through your hair absentmindedly, enjoying her attention. I got up to go sit on the balcony.

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When we'd moved in together, the first thing we bought were crimson bed sheets. Vibrant. Passionate. Flaming. Like us, we said, only half in jest. We'll always sleep in our love, we joked. Empty words, that made no sense to begin with, and soon meant nothing, though we laughed each time one of us said them, hoping the laughter would fill us and the chasm that gaped between us. But the laughter was hollow and forced, as shrill desperation crept in, and the crinkles by our eyes tightened anxiously.

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Don't do this to me, you protest. Don't sit there and pretend you don't care. I don't care, I say. I haven't for a long time. Much longer than you realize.

Your face freezes into a mask. You came prepared to comfort me, to be strong yet distant, to provide a rationale for why--things have to be the way they are--but instead of following your script,

I've changed direction. I'm not vulnerable and hurt, desperate to win you back. You've eaten away the part of me that was capable of that, you've devoured my tenderness.

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I retreated to the corner of the balcony, hidden in the shadows. I could see her through the glass sliding door but not you. The distant sound of traffic sixteen stories below dulled the sounds of the music and laughter into a muted symphony. As she laughed again and accepted a drink from you, I died and was reborn without a heart.

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One can be a thousand selves in a lifetime, I once told you, yet never can one be the same self with any two people.

You laughed and said I'd better not be the same as I was with you with any one else, and you kissed my neck.

But I shifted away from you, irritated that you had missed my point.

Now I realize that you did understand, but were afraid that I had already become someone else, as you had.

* * *

You fiddle with the packets of sugar and little creamers, arranging them into patterns and designs, and then wiping them away with your hand to start over. I was always the one who couldn't carry on a conversation without toying with something. I note that you've taken over my nervous habit, and glance at my still hands, casually cradling my white ceramic mug.

Listen, I finally say, and pause slightly.

You look up, startled at the sound of my voice.

Don't tell me we're here to help me to deal with this, I say, I don't need your help. We're here for the simple reason that you want to be able to not feel guilty. Right?

You arrange the creamers around your mug and lift your mug away, leaving a nearly perfect circle. The girl at the next table is barely able to disguise her interest.

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Perfection is not possible, I once told you, but you disagreed.

If we can't be perfect, you argued, why should we bother with anything.

If we *can* be perfect, I responded, why should we bother with anything. Most of the world should despair because they must know that they will never achieve it. But if near-perfection is what is realistically possible, who can hope to determine how near perfection we actually are. So everybody will have to accept each other's quirks and imperfections because they are as near-perfect as they are capable of. And every one could be happy knowing they are nearly perfect.

You frowned a moment, and said that you thought that I was perfect and so everyone else should try to be perfect too, and you laughed.

The flippant words burdened me, and the careless standard of perfection that you set for me stunted my laughter.

* * *

I saw her lean in to take your beer bottle from your hand, and then her head tilted back as she tasted it. And I saw you lean in to whisper something to her, and she laughed, half choking back the mouthful of beer.

An hour. Two. Four. I don't know how many lifetimes I stood on the balcony, watching the party from the outside. Once, maybe twice some people came out, but seeing me, they quickly went back to the glowing apartment.

I watched the candle flames gutter and fade into thin smoky spirals. I heard the music melt to a pulsing beat kept in time with my heart. I felt the earth spin, twisting the night sky close over it.

But you never came to back to me.

* * *

You are getting irritated with me, with my apparent indifference. I can see the vein in your forehead starting to pulse.

Listen, I say, feigning all sensitivity and concern, we've come full circle. It's time for us to be over. We've used up our time together. Let's leave it at that.

I know you believe in fate, in destiny. You believe that everything has its fore-ordained time and, with that, its limitations. I believe in destiny as well; I believe in its eternity. But I will never let you know that now.

You look somewhat relieved that I am being so reasonable, but also a bit disappointed that you will not get to play the solid protector role that you enjoy so much. I am being much too controlled and capable.

The girl at the next table sighs, collects her magazines and leaves. Strangely, I feel I've let her down somehow by not giving her a show to enjoy, full of tears and accusations. I watch her out of the coffee shop. Once outside, she holds her sweater tightly around her body and braces herself against the wind as she makes her way to the bus stop.

Here. I'll write down the address of where I'm staying now and you can drop off my stuff any time. I scrawl my sister's address on a napkin and get up to go. I have nothing left to say to you, and don't want to hear anything you might have left to say to me. You look as though you might say something. I watch you warily, daring you to say it, hoping that you won't.

You are staring into your coffee mug again, watching the few drops in the bottom lazily slip around as you tilt the mug this way and that. You angle it so that the little bit of liquid balances on the lip of the ceramic. It hovers precariously, defying gravity, suspended on the edge. Then it falls, splashing onto the table top, and you quickly wipe it away with your sleeve, as if you hope I won't notice.

That'll make a stain if you don't wash it right away, I say with an edge of humour in my voice. And a trace of sadness that I can't disguise.

It probably will, you agree quietly.

I shove the napkin with the address in your direction and turn to leave, hoping I'll make it outside before the tears begin to fall, so that the wind can blow them away.

An Ode to Timothy Bruneau

His movements are poetry;
The very personification of grace.
His deeds are legend.
He is the possessor of a mind that contemplates
The world in its entirety
And the celestial seas
That exist beyond the sight of ordinary creatures.
His council is wisdom.
His countenance is bliss.
His might and mindfulness
Guard him from the jealousies of lesser men.
If he may not be made a myth
Then cursed be Zeus!
And let him fall
From the heights of Mount Olympus
As punishment for his blasphemy.

Had Timmy written this
It would have rhyme and meter
And eloquence to melt the soul.
But modesty prevents him
And my own inadequacies are revealed
To sing his praises.
Before him, I am merely nothing.
I am a worm. (A tear stains this page, alas!)
I would take his weakness as my strength
His foolishness as my wisdom.
A thousand suns light his path
As I stumble blind.
He grows in wealth and fame
As I wallow in destitution.
He embodies all that is good in humanity
While I, envious and full of strife, am a cur.

Oh shall I go on?
Or shall my cruel tongue cease,
And I yield to my better?
Need I ask which is more fitting?

Harold Alkema

